

# *Report*

# Death Valley National Park

## ■ 1.0 Site Description

The Death Valley National Monument (Monument) was established by presidential proclamation on February 11, 1933. The original Monument contained approximately 1,601,800 acres. Supplementary proclamations in March 1937 and January 1952 increased the Monument's land area to 2,067,793 acres. The Monument was subsequently enlarged and incorporated into the NPS by Congressional action on October 31, 1994. With the passage of the California Desert Protection Act, approximately 1.3 million acres of new lands were added. A total of 95 percent of the area was designated as wilderness, bringing the total acreage of the Death Valley National Park to 3,396,192 acres.

Death Valley National Park (Park) is the largest national park unit in the lower 48 states. It is the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere and one of the hottest places in the world. It is also a vast geological museum, containing examples of most of the earth's geologic eras (see Figure 1). Here, plant and animal species, some of which cannot be found anywhere else in the world, have adapted to the harsh desert environment.

**Figure 1. View of Death Valley**



The vast majority of the Park is located in the California counties of Inyo and San Bernardino, but a small portion of the Park is located in the Nevada counties of Nye and Esmeralda. California State Highway 190 (SH 190) crosses the Park in the east to west directions, and Highway 95 parallels the Park in the north to south direction on the Park's eastern boundary. There are five state highway entrances to the Park and numerous unpaved entrances.

As shown in Figure 2, Townes Pass and Furnace Creek, both on SH 190, are the principal entrance routes to the Park. Highway 95 and SH 190 serve as the primary access routes for visitors coming from the Las Vegas, Nevada area. Interstate 15 (I-15) also serves as a major access route for visitors from the Los Angeles area, and Highway 395 provide access

for visitors from the Lake Tahoe, Yosemite, and other eastern California and western Nevada areas. Other access routes to the Park include the Jubilee Pass, Daylight Pass, and Grapevine Pass. The Park also contains a vast network of roads, ranging from highways to unmaintained, unpaved four-wheel drive roads. Park staff maintains approximately 696 miles of roads. Of that, 243 miles are classified as “standard vehicle roads.” High clearance or four-wheel drive roads include 442 miles. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) maintains Highway 190, the main travel route through the Park. In addition, there are many miles of roads maintained by the various counties or by private mining companies.

**Figure 2. Location of Death Valley National Park**

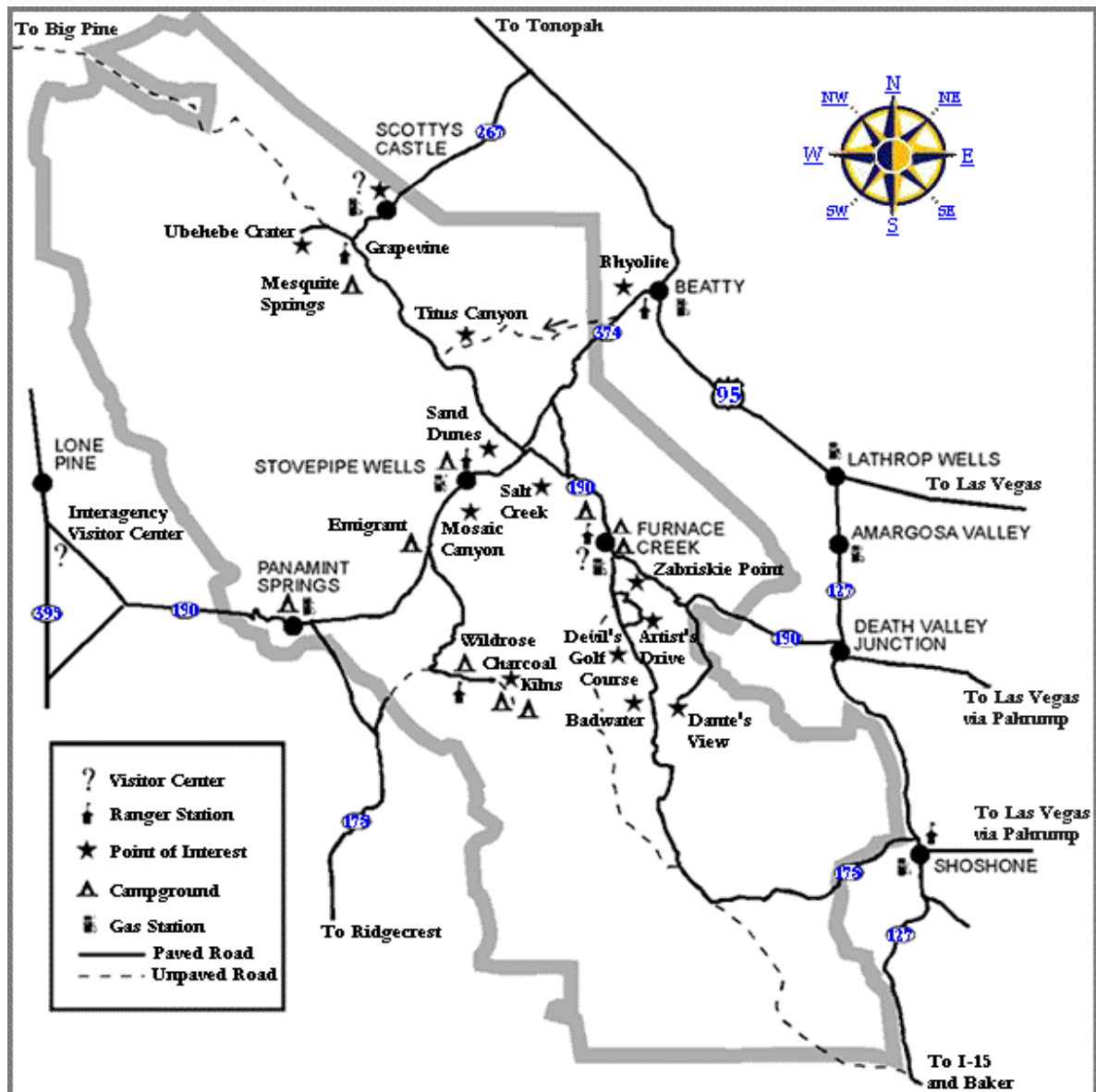


Table 1 shows traffic figures recorded by Caltrans for 1995 at the Park's major access routes. The traffic volumes reflect the combined number of vehicles traveling in both directions.

**Table 1. Average Daily Traffic Levels in 1995**

State Highway	Peak Hour	Peak Month	Annual Average
Route 127, San Bernardino/Inyo County line	110	660	550
Route 178, between Junction 127/State line	95	890	750
Route 190/Route 136 east of Owens Lake	110	950	550
Route 190, Death Valley Junction	120	860	680

Source: NPS, Draft General Management Plan (GMP) and Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Death Valley National Park.

The Park has established several major visitor facilities including:

- **Furnace Creek Visitor Center** – The largest complex, centrally located at Furnace Creek. This Visitor Center includes a staffed information desk, interpretive displays on the natural and cultural features of the Park, a large auditorium featuring an orientation film and various slide programs, and a sales outlet of the Death Valley Natural History Association. This facility, completed in 1960, was planned when annual visitation was 250,000. Its interpretive mediums are dated and focus on the Monument lands. Overnight use, campgrounds, motels, and restaurants are also available at Furnace Creek.
- **The Scotty's Castle Visitor Center** – This Visitor Center is located in one of the historic structures north of the castle. New displays, which depict the history of the area's indigenous people, construction of the Park's buildings, acquisition by the NPS, and the significance of the complex, are presented. The Visitor Center contains a sales outlet, and during the summer season, it serves as a general information and ticket sales counter. The guided tour of the castle involves employees dressed in period costumes that tell the story of how the castle came to be and of the individuals who lived there.
- **Beatty and Stovepipe Wells** – Staffed information/fee collection stations in the Beatty and Stovepipe Wells areas operate on a full schedule seven days a week for the entire year. Overnight use, campgrounds, motels, and restaurants are also available at Stovepipe Wells.
- **Lone Pine Interagency Visitor Center** – The Park also supports a multi-agency information center at Lone Pine serving visitors accessing Death Valley from Owens Valley to the west. There are Parking facilities for 10 cars and three or four buses or RVs.

Ranger stations at Grapevine, Wildrose, and Shoshone also provide visitors with information about the Park. These facilities operate with volunteers. Mojave National Preserve's Baker facility assists visitors approaching the Park from the I-15 corridor to the south. These facilities provide information, orientation, and interpretation for the Park and the region. The entrance fee to the Park is \$10 (valid for seven days). Fees are collected at the

Grapevine Entrance Station, Beatty ranger station, Stovepipe Wells ranger station, Furnace Creek Visitor Center, and Baker Visitor Center.

The Death Valley region also has over 600 campsites. The Park has nine developed campgrounds that offer a variety of camping experiences. Most campground use occurs primarily from November through April because of the cooler temperatures. This activity is concentrated at Furnace Creek and Stovepipe Wells. The Sunset campground at Furnace Creek consists of an expansive open area, which is used by recreational vehicles and trailers. Many people stay overnight in recreational vehicles, but the number of such users appears to be declining.

The Park recorded 231,902 overnight stays by recreational vehicles in 1979 compared to 165,253 in 1995, a 28 percent decrease in RV users over 16 years. Campgrounds at Furnace Creek and the group site at Texas Springs are on a campsite reservation system. Furnace Creek, Stovepipe Wells, Sunset and Texas Springs campgrounds are wheel chair accessible. Mahogany Flat, Thorndike, and Wildrose, on the west side of the Panamint mountain range (4,100 to 8,200 feet elevation), are subject to seasonal closures due to snow and other weather.

The Park has long provided recreational opportunities for people from all over the world. Its proximity to major population centers such as Los Angeles and Las Vegas, combined with major interstate highway access, provides local and regional persons the opportunity to easily access many parts of the desert. Most of the landscape is open, with broad vistas of relatively undeveloped land. The vastness of the landscape offers visitors an opportunity for seclusion and a sense of wilderness.

Death Valley is also an internationally recognized destination. Commercial tour groups visit Death Valley, often as part of a loop tour, which includes stops at Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon, and Yosemite. Overnight stays associated with tour buses have increased significantly from 342 buses in 1983 to 2,185 buses in 1995. Many Europeans use rental car and Asian visitors primarily use tour buses. International tourism has been recently strong as currency exchange rates continue to be favorable. Many Europeans come during the hottest part of the summer to experience the extreme temperatures and landscape that is often a drastic contrast to their homeland. Visitation summaries since 1985 are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Death Valley National Park Annual Visitation**

	1985	1990	1995	1997
<b>Visitation</b>	576,400	691,000	1,109,400	1,222,762

Source: NPS, Draft GMP and EIS, Death Valley National Park.

The majority of visitation to the Park has historically occurred during the cooler months of fall, winter, and spring. However, recent data indicates that visitation during the summer months has increased significantly to the point that Park staff no longer consider summer the

off-peak. The months with the highest visitation in past years had been November, March, and April. Recent visitation shows a close balance between visitation in cool and hot months.

Death Valley has attracted people for many reasons, but the primary reasons seem to be the scenic beauty, the opportunity to visit the lowest and hottest place in the western hemisphere, and the notoriety of the name “Death Valley.” People are also drawn to the area because of the contrast the desert provides. The majority of all visitors spend their time on the paved roads sightseeing and at major attractions such as Dantes View, Scotty’s Castle, and Badwater. Currently, very few visitors venture onto unpaved roads to visit the remote sections of the Park. These sections include such places as Eureka Dunes, Saline Valley, and Hunter Mountain, but that number is expected to increase as a result of recent newspaper and magazine articles and the promotion efforts of local communities.

Surveys conducted in 1990, 1994, and 1996 provide a profile of typical visitors to the Park. The 1990 survey was conducted by contacting visitors in developed and remote areas of the Park. The 1994 survey focused on backcountry areas of the Park and the 1996 survey was conducted in developed areas and major visitor attractions. The primary results of each survey show that the majority of visitors came to the Park to enjoy the scenery. Other significant activities include visits to mining and historic sites and off-roading. A summary of the visitor surveys is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3. Death Valley National Park Visitor Profile**

Visitor Profile	July 1990 Visitor Survey	March 1994 Backcountry Survey	September 1996 Visitor Survey
California Resident	21%	59%	32%
Foreign Country	72%	9%	69%
Repeat visitor	19%	56%	18%
First time visitor	82%	44%	82%
Average age	41 years	43 years	43 years
Average length of stay	72% stayed less than 1 day	48% stayed 2-3 days	66% stayed less than 1 day

Source: NPS, Draft GMP and EIS, Death Valley National Park.

## ■ 2.0 Existing ATS

Currently, there are no existing Alternative Transportation Systems (ATS) or any direct public transit service to the Park. However, a private shuttle bus operator out of Las Vegas once operated service from Las Vegas to Furnace Creek via Pahrump. This service included one or two buses per day, using seven to nine passenger vans. Service was

canceled as a result of poor profitability. Currently, all visitors use private automobiles, recreational vehicles, or tour buses to access the Park.

### ■ 3.0 ATS Needs

There does not appear to be any need for an ATS at Death Valley. Since the access roads are rarely congested, and current Parking is not a problem (except for rare occasions), there is no incentive for visitors to use transit. The extreme desert temperatures and weather also make any form of transit implementation difficult. During the summer months, there are no incentives for visitors to get out of their air-conditioned vehicles to wait for a transit vehicle in the 100-plus degree temperature. Furthermore, as a result of the dispersed types of activities and destinations within the Park, visitors will continue to drive their private automobiles to access these different sites.

### ■ 4.0 Basis for ATS Needs

There is no basis for any ATS needs.

### ■ 5.0 Bibliography

Death Valley National Park. *Draft General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement, Death Valley National Park*. Death Valley National Park, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 199?.

Littlejohn, Margaret. *Death Valley National Park Visitor Study*. Prepared by the Cooperative Park Studies Unit, University of Idaho, Visitor Services Project Report 90, Fall 1996.

Death Valley National Park Web site (<http://www.nps.gov/deva/>).

### ■ 6.0 Persons Interviewed

Richard Martin, superintendent, Death Valley National Park